The Ghost of Old Borders: Why Tensions in Yemen’s East Resemble a Forgotten War

UAE-backed Southern Transnational Council ambitions collide with Saudi strategic depth as new borders are drawn on the ground before politics catches up.

Just before dawn, al-Wadi’ah remains quiet, its low buildings lining the road toward Sharura in Najran. The silence breaks as soldiers at a nearby border post detect the distant vibration of engines. Radio messages report armored cars and tracked vehicles advancing from the south. Artillery fire follows, and the small outpost attempts to return fire. The engagement lasts only minutes. Several defenders are killed immediately and the rest are captured as the position is overrun.

Far to the north, at the Khamis Mushait air base outside Najran, alarms ring. Pilots sprint toward their aircraft, climbing into the cockpits of F-86 Sabre jets. The roar of engines breaks the dawn as the fighters climb sharply, banking southward toward the advancing column. In the capitals of the region, a flurry of accusations spreads across ministries and embassies.

Aden's government claims it is reclaiming territory inherited through British colonial injustice. While Riyadh warns that communist radical elements are seeking to destabilize the entire Arabian Peninsula. Rumors circulate that western pilots have entered the conflict, and whispers suggest that a distant power is guiding events from the shadows.

This is not a snapshot of present-day tension in southeastern Yemen. It is a reimagining of the first moments of the 26 November 1969 clash at the al-Wadi'ah border crossing between People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and Saudi Arabia.

Note: In the subscriber-only section below, you will find five scenarios and forecasts developed after Basha Report conducted ten exclusive interviews with well-informed senior Yemeni, Western and Arabian Gulf officials.

What became known as the al-Wadi'ah war survives a State Department intelligence note and echoed in CIA assessments that cast the Aden government in 1969 as ideologically ambitious, supported from the Soviet Union, Syria, Iraq, and willing to challenge Saudi resolve along a vague and shifting frontier.

Today the geography appears unsettlingly familiar. Social media posts and international newspapers have chronicled the steady advance of UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council forces (STC) into the Wadi and Desert regions of Hadramawt.

For Saudi Arabia this area has long been a buffer protecting its southeastern flank and preserving the security of the key border crossing at al-Wadi'ah. Furthermore, the deep historical and social ties between Saudi Arabia and the Hadrami community on both sides of the border continue to shape Riyadh's approach, a dynamic explored in greater detail in Scenario Two below.

Reports indicate that STC units traveling from southern governorates have moved into Sayoun and neighboring districts, seized military installations and airfields near key oil infrastructure and established new checkpoints along the routes linking the interior to the coast.

In al-Mahra, political authority has shifted through negotiated handovers and the flag of the former South Yemen has been raised above government buildings. The territorial map of eastern Yemen is in motion and the actors driving this change are not aligned with Riyadh.

These advances place all eight former South Yemeni governorates under STC control, the first instance of unified southern authority since the short-lived secession war in the summer of 1994.

Oman responded by temporarily closing its border with Yemen and calling for the removal of the South Yemen flag and the return of recognized border personnel, though it has since eased its stance.

What initially appeared to be a coordinated STC advance, possibly undertaken with Riyadh's approval and Abu Dhabi's support, quickly proved otherwise. The pace of the STC's expansion caught Saudi Arabia off guard, and public commentary shifted as it became clear the operation had unfolded without Saudi alignment.

Riyadh has not viewed these moves as routine adjustments. Instead it has responded with diplomatic pressure, military signaling and targeted engagement with tribal and political figures to reassert influence over events.

A senior delegation led by Major General Mohammed Obeid bin Julaighm al-Qahtani, head of the Special Committee on Yemen, and Major General Falah al-Shahrani, a senior advisor to the Saudi Joint Forces traveled to Hadramawt to declare the region's security a national priority.

Simultaneously Saudi Arabia strengthened its relations with local tribal forces, reinforced aligned formations such as National Shield Forces (NSF) units and sought to manage rising tensions between Abu Dhabi backed forces and Saudi affiliated networks. The goal is clear. Riyadh intends to prevent the consolidation of an Emirati oriented corridor along the southeastern border that could diminish Saudi influence in South Yemen and alter the regional balance of power.

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Air transport movements further illustrate the seriousness with which Saudi Arabia views the moment. Two C 130 aircraft, almost certainly Saudi military transports, landed at Aden International Airport during a brief closure of the facility prompted by the withdrawal of Saudi personnel. A third C 130 took off from Rayan Airport in Mukalla carrying the governor of Hadramawt along with prominent Saudi military officials including Maj. Gen. al-Qahtani and Maj, Gen. al-Shahrani.

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Historically, CIA Analysts in Washington noted that South Yemen's revolutionary leadership used Soviet support to pursue ambitions that exceeded its institutional capacity. Today the STC is not driven by Marxist ideology but by a project of southern statehood. Its eastward movement reflects a strategic calculation that territorial control in Hadramawt and al-Mahra is essential for any future southern state to be viable. Emirati logistics, funding and training support this goal, giving the STC the confidence to advance into regions where its local legitimacy remains contested.

For Saudi Arabia the dilemma of 1969 also reappears. Riyadh must protect its borders and preserve influence across southeastern Yemen while avoiding a rupture with Abu Dhabi. The Saudi Emirati partnership has been central to Gulf security for a decade. Yet it is also a partnership marked by divergent priorities, competitive interventions and mutual suspicion. The normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, Abu Dhabi's engagement with the ousted Syrian Assad regime, differences in OPEC policy, business rivalry, historical border disputes, and opposing positions in Sudan have strained trust

between the two states. The Saudi-UAE competition now visible in eastern Yemen is therefore not an isolated episode but part of a broader pattern of geopolitical divergence.

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The sharpest signs of strain between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi before the STC's advance into eastern Yemen emerged over Sudan. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic campaign placed unusually direct pressure on the UAE, targeting Abu Dhabi's support for the RSF. Riyadh pushed the issue in Washington as a matter of regional stability, urging the United States to curb Emirati military links to the paramilitary force. Its lobbying escalated to calls for measures as severe as terrorist designations and potential secondary sanctions. The push blindsided Abu Dhabi, which had expected to manage the Sudan portfolio without Riyadh's intrusion and to rely on its political weight—despite not supplying the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in the way the UAE has armed the RSF.

Instead, Riyadh forced Sudan onto the center of U.S. deliberations, making clear it was prepared to challenge Emirati actions when they conflicted with Saudi strategic priorities.

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Against this backdrop several scenarios emerge that illuminate the range of possible outcomes.

Scenario One: STC Backs Down

In this scenario Saudi Arabia takes decisive steps to fortify the 170 kilometer corridor running from Sharura through al-Wadi'ah to al-'Abr. This corridor would form a defensive belt protecting the Saudi border and securing the approaches to Ma'rib. As Saudi forces continue withdrawing from areas of southwestern Yemen that have come under STC control many units may relocate to Ma'rib. The city already hosts elements of the 3rd, 6th and 7th Military Region Commands (MRC) as well as brigades previously based in Hadramawt and al-Mahra from the 1st MRC.

Reinforcing this concentration of forces would allow Saudi Arabia to ensure that Ma'rib remains a reliable partner and a stable northern anchor against both Houthi expansion and STC encroachment.

As of 9 a.m. ET on 9 December, only the Yemen Emergency Forces and the NSF are confirmed mobilized to the frontline with STC in Hadramawt, as indicated on the map above. Circulating older videos of Saudi deployments may be part of psychological messaging, and there is no verified evidence of heavy Saudi armor crossing Wadi'ah into Yemen.

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The timing of Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's visit on 08 December 2025 to meet with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, where the two leaders co-chaired the eighth session of the Qatari Saudi Coordination Council at Al Yamamah Palace in Riyadh, also coincided with these developments. Although Yemen was not mentioned in official statements or press coverage, diplomats confirm that it was a central topic of discussion as GCC capitals moved quickly to reduce tensions between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

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In this scenario, Saudi Arabia would leverage its influence over financial flows to the Aden-based Central Bank its control of Yemeni airspace, and its strong position within international institutions to pressure the STC. If necessary Riyadh could encourage partners at the United Nations to classify STC actions as obstructionist under existing resolutions. Riyadh will also nourish the Growing Hadrami public mobilization demanding the departure of southern fighters originating from outside the governorate would intensify pressure on the STC. Faced with regional, international and domestic constraints the STC may eventually choose negotiation rather than confrontation.

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This remains, by all indications, the scenario most likely to materialize, as Abu Dhabi is unlikely to jeopardize its relationship with Riyadh over the contest for South Yemen.

The internal dynamics among southern actors further reinforce this trajectory. The General Commander of the Saudi-backed NSF, the Salafi Sheikh Bashir al-Mudrabi of the al-Subaiha tribes in Lahij, has reemerged publicly to challenge the STC's advance, aligning himself on the surface against his long-time Salafi counterpart Abdulrahman al-Mahrami, commander of the UAE-backed Southern Giant Brigades, Vice President of both the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and the STC. Despite their apparent divergence, the two men are likely coordinating behind the scenes to de-escalate the situation, a dynamic explored more fully in Scenario Two.

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Under this scenario, the STC may ultimately agree to pull its forces out of Sayoun and the Wadi and Desert districts of Hadramawt. In exchange, it would retain the weapons and ammunition seized from the 1st MRC brigades and secure a larger share of the political process, further cementing its status as the leading southern actor. Saudi-backed NSF units would then move in to assume control of military bases, checkpoints and security operations across the region, while the STC continues to build political influence and expand its grassroots support. Such an outcome would place the STC one step closer to the longer-term objective of establishing an independent southern state.

Scenario Two: Saudi Recognition of an Independent Hadramawt and al-Mahra State

Should the STC conclude that Saudi pressure is moving toward open conflict, it may rapidly declare an independent southern state under titles such as the Federal Republic of South Arabia (FRSA), the Federal State of South Arabia (FSSA), or the South Arabia State (SAS).

Such a move could push Saudi Arabia toward a political approach aimed at avoiding direct military confrontation with the STC. This is especially true given that the main Saudi-backed formation, the NSF, is composed of southern Salafis who are unlikely to confront the Southern Giant Brigades [Note: Coming soon to Basha Report, a deep dive into the Southern Giant Brigades], a 50,000-strong southern Salafi force supported by the UAE.

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Saudi Arabia has deep historic ties to both regions rooted in migration, commerce and political refuge. After the socialist takeover of the south in 1967 many Hadrami leaders fled to Saudi Arabia where they were given protection and space to preserve their social and political identities. Families with Hadrami origins have played influential roles in Saudi business and politics for generations. This network provides Riyadh with a strong foundation for cultivating an independent Hadramawt state aligned with Saudi interests.

Such a state would command significant territory and control much of Yemen's eastern coastline and inland trade routes. It would also possess substantial economic resources including oil fields and potential ports. Saudi Arabia's long standing investments in al-Mahra would further ease integration into a new political framework.

In return, Hadrami leaders may offer Riyadh something long rumored but never realized: political support for a Saudi oil pipeline running through Hadramawt or al-Mahra to the Arabian Sea. Such a route would allow the Kingdom to bypass Iran's chokehold over the Strait of Hormuz, which affects crude shipped from facilities like Ras Tanura, and also avoid Houthi threats to Red Sea traffic near Yanbu. For Saudi Arabia, the prospect of an overland corridor to the Arabian Sea has been a strategic aspiration for decades, and Hadrami cooperation could bring it closer to reality.

The creation of this state would divide Yemen into three or possibly four discrete entities. North Yemen would remain under Houthi control. Southern western Yemen would be influenced by the STC. Eastern Yemen would emerge as a Saudi or Omani aligned state(s). While controversial this outcome would protect Saudi borders and prevent the STC from establishing dominance over the east.

Saudi Arabia's core interests in al-Mahra are evident through a series of major investments, including the recently launched King Salman Medical Center, a flagship project valued at 213 million Saudi riyals (56.8 million USD). Built on one million square meters and the center's first phase includes a 110-bed hospital. This project is part of more than 53 development initiatives delivered by the Saudi Development

and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) across seven key sectors in al-Mahra, underscoring Riyadh's long-term strategic footprint in the governorate.

However, even after years of Saudi investment and military entrenchment, al-Mahra's affinities remain closer to Oman. Tribal lineage, shared language and cross-border kinship still outweigh Riyadh's financial footprint, keeping the governorate within Muscat's gravitational pull. How Oman interprets the current escalation, however, will require further research and clarification.

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Scenario Three: A Protracted Crisis that Weakens the Anti-Houthi Front

A third possibility is that tensions remain unresolved and gradually transform into a chronic political and military crisis. Saudi backed units in Ma'rib would be forced to divert attention to the STC's eastward movement. STC units would also be redeployed from Lahij, al-Dhale', Shabwah, and Abyan fronts to consolidate their new positions in Hadramawt and al-Mahra. This reshuffling of forces would create vulnerabilities along the lines facing the Houthis.

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Sensing weakness the Houthis could launch multi-direction offensives aimed at recapturing territory in the south. Their strategy has long focused on exploiting divisions among their opponents. A fractured anti-Houthi front would provide the ideal opportunity to press forward.

Meanwhile security vacuums in contested areas would allow violent extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (IS-Y) to regroup and expand. The combination of Houthi offensives and rising extremist activity would destabilize both Yemen and the wider region and could further threaten maritime routes along the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

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Scenario Four: International Intervention and Anti Houthi Realignment

The most favorable scenario requires strong international pressure on both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to de escalate their competition in eastern Yemen. External actors including the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, European Union, GCC, and key regional partners could facilitate a renewed focus on confronting the Houthis rather than internal disputes. Diplomatic engagement would seek to persuade both states that cooperation is essential to prevent the fragmentation of Yemen into multiple hostile entities.

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A coordinated approach could help define the contours of a future Yemeni political settlement. This settlement could involve federal or confederal structures or other arrangements acceptable to Yemeni

stakeholders. Rebuilding trust between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is central to this scenario and will require addressing the deeper sources of tension that have accumulated over the years. This path is challenging but offers the only sustainable strategy that reduces conflict in Yemen rather than multiplying it.

Scenario Five: A Worst-Case Spiral into a Multi-Front Southern Civil War

The least likely scenario emerges if political tensions fully collapse and Yemen's anti-Houthi coalition fractures into open warfare. In this trajectory, Saudi-backed northern and southern formations could be drawn into direct combat with UAE-backed STC forces across multiple fronts in Ma'rib, Hadramawt, Shabwa and Lahij. The confrontation could expand further by pulling the UAE-backed National Resistance Forces (NRF) into clashes with northern Islah-leaning units in Ta'izz, erasing the remaining coordination between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and turning the south into a patchwork of rival military zones.

The least likely yet most perilous scenario emerges if political tensions fully collapse and Yemen's anti-Houthi coalition fractures into open warfare.

A conflict of this nature would mirror Sudan's slide into protracted chaos, marked by overlapping battle lines, fragmented armed groups and the erosion of local governance. Cities could become contested battlegrounds, supply routes would be severed and tribal alliances forced to realign under pressure, further deepening fragmentation. The humanitarian consequences would be severe, driving mass displacement and creating space for extremist organizations to reconstitute.

Most dangerously, such internal fragmentation would not only destabilize the south but could also set the stage for the Houthis to exploit the crisis. An exhausted and divided anti-Houthi coalition would be vulnerable to a coordinated northern offensive, allowing the Houthis to push beyond their current lines and potentially overrun the remainder of Yemen.

The broader regional implications would be profound. A southern civil war of this scale would cement the Saudi–UAE rivalry, fracture the GCC's already fragile unity and invite external intervention. Although this scenario remains the least probable, its destructive potential underscores the stakes of miscalculation. Without sustained alignment between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and without mechanisms to contain local escalations, Yemen could slide into a prolonged, deadly conflict that reshapes the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Commentary

The landscape in eastern Yemen is shifting at remarkable speed. The echoes of 1969 serve as a reminder that conflicts shaped by political ambition, external sponsorship and disputed borders can escalate with little warning. Whether the next phase brings consolidation, fragmentation, confrontation or cooperation, the choices made in the coming days will influence not only Yemen's trajectory but the wider security architecture of the Arabian Peninsula.

If Riyadh and Abu Dhabi fail to reconcile their competing visions in Hadramawt and al-Mahra, and if local groups continue to use territorial expansion as a tool of internal legitimacy, the scene that opened

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The lesson from that earlier conflict is not that history repeats itself, but that the underlying dynamics endure. When southern Yemeni actors leverage external support to redraw boundaries, and when Saudi Arabia perceives its strategic depth shrinking in the east, even limited incidents can accelerate into wider crises. If Riyadh and Abu Dhabi fail to reconcile their competing visions in Hadramawt and al-Mahra, and if local groups continue to use territorial expansion as a tool of internal legitimacy, the scene that opened this article may not be a relic of history at all. It could just as easily be tomorrow's headline, foreshadowing a confrontation that lies ahead rather than a war half a century gone.